

Shades of Color: The Changing Face of Children's Literature

Author: Erica Serock

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Shades of Color:
The Changing Face of Children's Literature

A senior Thesis by Erica Serock '03

Advisor: Susan Michalczyk

Introduction

Children's literature possesses the power to crumble walls of prejudice, open the mind to unlimited possibilities and perhaps most importantly, entertain children whatever their race, age or social status. Many people have such fond memories of the books they read as children that, should you demand of any American college student what his

favorite book was as a child, and he will find it difficult to narrow his selection down to just one. Ask any American child what her favorite movie during childhood and inherently nine out of ten children will choose a movie made by Walt Disney. Indeed literature and the stories of childhood play an important role in the intellectual and psychological development of human beings. During childhood, the literature children read and have read to them often lay the seeds for their future views of themselves and the world. If this were the case, then how much caution should be taken with the themes of these books? Children's literature is defined as "books that are good for children, written with their general necessities and entertainment in mind."¹ The "goodness" of these books is determined not only in their vivid creativity and wildly imaginative stories, but as well in the long lasting lessons they impart upon the children who read them. These books give a child a glimpse into distant lands far away from the suburb they live in or the city in whose parks they play every day. As well, literature can also cultivate cultural prejudices and stereotypes that can either damage a child's developing psyche or improve it. From its inception, children's literature has always been meant to shape and mold children to the will of society. The question remains to be answered, if literature holds such power over us, then what control should responsible publishers, teachers, librarians and parents exercise in determining what their children should be reading? Where does one draw the line between education and politics in the world of children's literature?

In order to fully examine this question and comprehend its implications, one must first examine the history of children's literature and what it originally desired to achieve.

¹Savage, John. *For the Love of Literature, Children & Books in the Elementary Years.*

Then, once the evolution has been traced, one can analyze the future and determine where the shifts that have occurred in children's literature throughout the eras are leading us in the years to follow.

The journey Americans and their literature have taken within the past 100 years is rather like the journey Dorothy undertook in Frank Baum's masterful children's tale *The Wizard of Oz*. At first, life seemed simple, like the plains of Kansas. Literature did not create controversy because none of the themes authors chose to write about strayed from the status quo. Instead of challenging society to rise to new levels, literature lay stagnant like an unchanging farm. From the plains of Kansas, a twister of new ideas and social changes swept the world of literature down the yellow brick road towards the beginning of a great journey towards the varied state of children's books enjoyed today. That road led the world to the wonderful city of Oz, where literature flourished and seemed to be available in plentiful quantity. But with great success comes great cost as America found itself searching through the dark woods for answers to plaguing issues of diversity, gender relations, and how much should children's literature adapt to the politics of the day. Finally, as America emerges from the days of social revolution into modern times, a sense of trying to put back together everything deconstructed in previous times pervades. Instead of emphasizing our differences, literature has found a manner in which to represent diversity without stressing it. Perhaps in a way, it can be said that modern day authors have found road back to the plains of Kansas where we return now with new knowledge from their life's journey.

Part 1: The Plains of Kansas

The history of literature in the pre-Renaissance

Once upon a time a fairy story did not exist merely for childish entertainment, but rather to explain the elusive mysteries and complex essence of an uncharted world. Though modern day society decrees that most fairy and folk stories be read to children as a means of bemusement, such was not always the case. In fact, only towards the end of the 19th century did the concept of the child as a child and not just the “young adult” even begin to flesh itself into reality. Children’s literature has continuously evolved throughout the ages. Like the Little Match Girl of Hans Christian Anderson, children of the past were not considered children, but rather the adults treated the children in exactly the same manner as they treated each other. Children had to help the family earn a living. Childhood as we know it today did not exist. Instead of being a time of fanciful enjoyment, shielded from the problems of the “real world”, childhood was viewed as a time for these small versions of their adult counterparts not to be sheltered but rather to experience day-to-day tribulations while working side by side with their parents. With no education, few common people could read and write. Therefore, in the few fleeting moments of the day when a family could relax together, fantastic tales of magic were passed down orally from generation to generation. These tales mainly took the form of what now are known as fairy tales and folk tales. According to the Italian writer Italo Calvino, “the secret to a good fairy tale is that it should touch something deep within us that we feel rings true no matter how unreal it seems.”² In the introduction to his book, Calvino explores the Italian oral tradition as an archetype for the universal oral tradition. The importance of the tales passed down from age to age was the manner in which they unified the Italian people. In general, these early tales were not told directly for children, but were rather meant to explain the complexities of life and that which was not

²Calvino, Italo. *Italian Folktales*

understood. As well, fairy tales instilled implicit morals and models for behavior to children, often demonstrating harsh punishments if these morals were not followed. For example in the original *Snow White* tale, the queen was penalized for her evil actions by being condemned to dance on hot coals until her feet burnt off. Any child would be frightened enough of that horrible fate to learn to obey. While fairy tales used magic to explain natural phenomenon, folk tales are the tales of the common people: legends and myths of ancient heroes passed from parent to child. These tales can be as simple as the *Baba Yaga* tales of Russia or as intricate as the *Song of Roland* in France. While fairy tales attempt to explain religious and spiritual issues, or to install a sense of cosmic destiny and divine right into the lives of those who have heard the stories, folk tales examine the innocence and simplicity of common everyday life. While fairy tales can transcend cultural boundaries and be adapted from civilization to civilization, folk tales speak volumes about their parent society. In short, fairy tales and folk tales passed down through the oral tradition are the fundamental basis for all the literature we have today. Interestingly enough, they were not specifically for children. As John Savage states, “Children’s literature traces its beginnings to preliterate times when ancient bards and storytellers passed tales and legends from generation to generation... These ancient tales were not just for children; they were a means of information, inspiration, and entertainment of everybody in society.”³ It was not until well past the Renaissance, into the 17th and 18th century that adults became aware of a market for children’s stories.

Part 2: Down the Yellow Brick Road

The journey towards a literature solely for children

³Savage, John. *For the Love of Literature, Children & Books in the Elementary Years* pg4

When the Puritans landed on the shores of Massachusetts in the early 17th century, their settlement was very different from earlier European colonies. Instead of being solely comprised of men, the group that established itself at Plymouth consisted of families: men, women and children. Each passing year brought an increase in the amount of children in the colony. As a result, the Puritans found themselves burdened with an ever-growing need to educate the young. Since parents rarely had time to just be parents in these early, difficult days, literature was seen as a way to educate children. However, though these early hornbooks (as they were known for the protective animal horn sheen which covered them) retold classic stories such as the *Ballad of Robin Hood* and the *Legend of King Arthur*, in an attempt to link children with the culture they belonged to. So from its earliest point, literature written for children has possessed a cultural bias.

However, these hornbooks, while they represent a serious shift in books' target market, did not however "constitute a body of work that could be considered literature for children"⁴. In general, the literature the Puritans continued to give to children was "used as vessels for instilling precepts of good behavior, piety respect for parents, and other worthy goals that did little for enjoyment on the part of young readers."⁵ Indeed the titles of these books reveal how early children's literature was completely didactic and devoid of any sense of joy. For example, one famous story which taught children the necessity of a strong spiritual connection was *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babies in Either England, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments for Their Souls' Nourishment*. However, on the other side of the ocean, a drastic change in the nature of childhood literature was about to take place.

⁴Savage, John. *For the Love of Literature, Children & Books in the Elementary Years*

pg4

⁵Sutherland, Z. *The Newberry Award: Changing with the Times.* Pg21

While the American colonies continued to use their literature to further their “city on a hill”, an Englishman, John Newbery would create books which forever changed the essence of literature for children. Newbery had a vision, a vision of literature children could not only learn from, but also enjoy. In 1744, Newbery created books that boasted attractive formats with sturdy bindings to allow for heavy usage. These Newbery books also displayed beautiful, quality illustrations. In general, the books Newbery printed brought accessible, enjoyable, stories wrapped in child – proof packaging. Newbery brought in his source material from all cultures: *Mother Goose Tales* from Frenchman Charles Perrault, traditional English tales, as well as folk tales from all about Europe. His work laid the foundations for the burst of literature directed at children that exploded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Part 3: The Wonderful City of Oz

The Golden Age of Children’s Literature

The booming years of Children’s literature occurred in the 19th century for two reasons. The first reason comes from the sheer quantity of literature from all across the world produced for and directed at children. In the late 1800’s, the first publishing company with a mission uniquely to generate literature for children was founded. This company was founded in order to produce stories to fill the ever – increasing demand of literature for children. The second reason stems from the quality of this literature. From the Netherlands came the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson. In Germany, the Grimm Brothers completed their collection of the folk tales and compiled it into their magnum opus *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. India by route of England, gave the world the jungle stories of Rudyard Kipling. From England, children

could read Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Jules Verne of France brought children with him on his adventures from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to *From the Earth to the Moon*. In the 19th century, Europe and her colonies experienced a great outpouring of literature for children.

North America, too, was in the midst of a cultural revolution of sorts. Instead of the horribly dry books of the Puritans which still sought to connect America to her European forefathers, American authors in the 19th century wrote uniquely American tales which arose from the landscape and culture of the country bordered on one side by the Atlantic Ocean and on the other by the Pacific. Washington Irving tales such as *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* used the setting of the Catskills to create American folklore. From the great lakes of Minnesota, American children heard the story of Paul Bunyan, and the plains brought to American households the exploits of Pecos Bill and the "Wild Wild West". Mark Twain created Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn in the individualistic, enterprising nature he categorized as uniquely American. Even for girls, rather than being instructed how to marry well, as their European counterparts were, American girls could read the stories of *Little Women* or *Little House on the Prairie* and come to a greater understanding of their own identity as a unique, independent individual. Such tales continued well into the 20th century, emphasizing the equalizing nature of America such that anyone who worked hard, applied themselves, and had an adventurous spirit could accomplish anything they wished to in life. All of these books reinforced their message through lyrical style and fabulous illustrations that captured and enchanted the minds of the children who read them. Yet though the world of children's literature lay encased in a golden sheath, it proved to be no

more than fools' gold. The minute the paint began to peel, Americans began to question the true intent of these wondrous books and called for a revolution of epic proportions.

Part 4: Bring me the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West

Dangerous ground for Children's Literature

Many viewed America as a land of opportunity and equality yet actions speak louder than words. Up until the 1960's, the world of children's literature was an all-white club. In a country with the constantly increasing of America, this lack of multiculturalism within the literature paints a horrible picture. If one were to scan the illustrations of children's books of the past, one would be hard pressed to find a minority represented in anything other than a stereotypical role. The perfect example of the horrific stereotyping of minorities is *Little Black Sambo* by British author Helen Bannerman. In this book, Bannerman draws Sambo with features that more resemble the blackface stage actors of the early 20th century than an actual person of African descent. His name itself is a term often used in a derogatory manner towards blacks. His entire character is so crudely stereotyped that even the most skeptical of critics could hardly deny the blatant prejudice embodied by the illustrations. Yet his story continued to be one of the most controversial and popular children's stories of the early part of the 20th century.

Yet as society began to leap to the side of Martin Luther King Jr., as schools began to become desegregated and Jim Crow laws began to fall everywhere, there came a call for greater diversity within children's literature. Although many noted authors and educators demanded the inclusion of diverse characters within children's books, the article that caught the nation's attention and served as a "wake up call" to the public was

Nancy Larrick's 1965 Saturday Review of Literature article entitled "The All-White World of Children's Books". According to a study conducted by Larrick, only 6.7 percent of books for children published between 1962 and 1964 included any portrayal of African-Americans be it in text or in illustrations. Only 0.9% of those books that did portray African-Americans showed them in contemporary settings. Other minorities were represented even less. In response to Larrick's findings, a great push for multicultural literature was made. The Council for Interracial Books was founded in 1966 in order to heighten public awareness of diversity issues in children's literature. In 1970, Coretta Scott King bestowed the first Coretta Scott King Award to annually recognize an African-American writer and an African-American illustrator "for books that encourage understanding and appreciation of people of all cultures and their pursuit of the 'American Dream.'" ⁶ The task force gave the first award to Lillie Patterson for her book entitled *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Man of Peace*. The award, coupled with the intense call for diversity contributed to the rise in production of multicultural children's literature so that in 1975, when Larrick repeated her study, her statistics had more than doubled. 14.4% of all books for children published between 1973 and 1975 represented African-Americans in text or illustrations and four percent of those books showed them in contemporary settings. Unfortunately, the attention wore off after its first bloom of energy and when author Barbara Rollock replicated Larrick's study for the years between 1979 and 1984, she determined only 1.5% of newly published children's literature contained African-Americans.

The 80's saw stasis for the children's literature diversification movement. Yet in the early 90's, a sudden burst in multicultural children's literature brought about a sort of

⁶Coretta Scott King Task Force of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table

golden age for diversity. However, these books were often written from a European – American point of view and therefore presented racial issues from an outsider's perspective. Like their early counterparts, these books often placed emphasis upon the difference between races in a separate but equal perspective rather than on living in harmony with each other as brotherly equals. In this manner, the call to diversify children's literature circumvented its purpose for in trying to promote unity, what authors and illustrators actually did was create a greater case of "us" and "them".

Part 5: There's No Place Like Home

Modern Day Children's literature

Currently, due to an expansion of minority authors and illustrators, not only have children's books with a focus on racial issues become more authentic to the actual experience of these races in America, but the books not only promote difference, but togetherness. Race often takes a back seat to picturing white, black, Hispanic, native and Asian children interacting with each other in simple stories. Where friends in older books would have only been of one race, a book such as David Schwartz's *How Much is A Million?* represent all different races working together. Though there is much work still to be done both in literature and in society until America achieves true racial unity, much progress has been made since the Civil Rights Movement.

And so the question remains to be answered, exactly how far has American children's literature come in terms of its accurate portrayal of racial issues? In order to answer this question, one must consider the role that politics has and does still play within literature and analyze whether or not political issues have a place in children's books? While certain authors have often used children's literature as a vehicle for

political propaganda, the practice of blatantly stating political views in youth literature has been mainly tempered aside from the issue of multiculturalism. Why is it that this one issue bears such great importance that it merits placement in our texts?

This question is not an easy one to answer, but through a careful examination of society, a decent investigation can be made. Now only our modern education system can truly tell us if the ending to the question will really be “happily ever after”.

Chapter One

Deciphering Disney

Politics and children's literature have always been united in a strange tango. For instance, Charles Perrault wrote his famous *Contes de la Mère de L'Oye* (tales of mother goose) with the stated purpose of teaching young girls the rules of etiquette necessary for procuring a husband. Each story is followed by a “moral” explaining to young girls how they should employ the lessons learned in the story to obtain a proper marriage. Throughout the countless volumes of fairy tales and folklore, certain characters reappear constantly, despite culture, instructing children on what to do and not to do. In many fairy tales, such as Perrault's *La Petite Chaperon Rouge* (Little Red Riding Hood), the German tale *The Three Little Pigs* and the English story *Chicken Little*, a wolf plays the

role of the villain. The wolf always appears when the protagonist strays from the given path in order to make his or her own decisions. Though the protagonist might combat the wolf, the wolf will always defeat conceit, foolishness, and feebleness. The wolf as well often lurks in the dark forest, a symbol of the treacherous unknown. Many tales as well portray women as devilish vixens and often when men succumb to their will, they are terribly harmed. In *Rapunzel*, an evil witch blinds the prince who follows the siren's call. In *Sleeping Beauty*, a prince becomes entranced by the beauty of a sleeping maiden must then face the wrath of his ogre mother who attempts to eat the prince's wife and children. However, the wise man, who uses his intellect to outwit women, such as the clever man in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* is greatly rewarded, often with a kingdom. The fairy tales offer a moral blueprint on how life was to be lived in the days of feudalism. As evident in the study of the fairy tales, moral didacticism in literature geared towards children is an ancient concept. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to the reader in the 21st century that children's literature is not only seen as an instrument of entertainment, but as well an implement of education. Given to children in their young, crucial development stage, literature perhaps holds the greatest control over a child's perception of the world next to their parents. The politics of children's literature subconsciously influence the clean slate minds of the children who read, thus influencing their worldview and attempting to conform them to the will of society. The powerful influence literature has over children explains why most parents are so concerned about the types of books their children are reading.

Politics and children's literature can hardly be divorced. One classic example of a story enjoyed by children for its adventurous plot yet, when analyzed, conveys strong

standards for moral guidance is Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. Collodi, before becoming known as an author for children, was an inflammatory, revolutionary writer who scribed articles for the journal *Il Lampione*. According to Collodi, most of the problems society faced arose because of the lack of respect people possessed for one another. The only way he saw to remedy the situation was to educate children to obey their parents. Through quelling the rebellious nature of children, and instructing them how to be productive members of society, the world would become a better place. Thus, when Collodi sat down to write *Pinocchio* in 1881, his first goal was not enjoyment, but rather education.

The text opens with a woodcarver named Gepetto adopting an enchanted block of wood and shaping into a marionette with the form of a boy. The moment the puppet is finished, its first act is to run away from Gepetto. Gepetto tracks the boy through the streets, only to be arrested for "being a bad father". When Pinocchio returns home that night to an empty house, he cries because he is hungry, steals pears in order to feed himself, then falls asleep by the fire where the flames burn his wooden legs. In this scene, Collodi demonstrates the horrible affects a disobedient child can have upon his or her parents. A child may laugh at Pinocchio's whimsical capers, but the fact of the matter is that without his parents, a child cannot survive. Therefore, it is imperative to listen to one's parents so as to avoid a life of crime. A child reading this tale cannot help but fear life in an uncivil society and therefore quickly learns to "be a good boy like he should."

The theme of obedience and social responsibility continues throughout the novel. Pinocchio's consciousness is represented in two parts, one by a little girl with blue hair

and secondly by a cricket. Throughout the story, these two characters attempt to guide Pinocchio and give him moral guidance. Time and time again, Pinocchio defies these voices of reason, each time leading to a greater consequence; skipping school, deception and robbery by the fox and the cat, imprisonment in the field of miracles, and eventually the deaths of both the cricket and the blue haired girl. Eventually, after he kills the two companions in his life who ever offered any good advice, Pinocchio learns his lesson. He comprehends from his selfish actions that he must be obedient and must stop having concern only for himself. Pinocchio decides that he must do as society tell him to, and though life is now full of hard work, he gains much greater satisfaction from his daily chores. In the end, then novel *Pinocchio* teaches children that frivolities will only lead one to idle destruction whereas hard work and unbending morals will bring satisfaction and a meaningful existence.

As evident in the story of *Pinocchio*, children's literature has always been used not as a source of entertainment, but mainly as a didactic tool. Collodi employs a series of symbols that are meant to frighten children into behavioral modifications. The plethora of animals that appear throughout *Pinocchio* all have a variety of symbolic importance. For example, Pinocchio is first tricked into losing all of his money by a fox. Like in so many fairy tales from antiquity, the fox is used to represent craftiness, evil, and deception. These characteristics are used to instruct children about the temptations which exist in life. However, so long as children maintain a morally upright way of life, no evil shall befall them. Another animal that plays an important role in the novel is the shark that eats Pinocchio's father. However, in this story, the shark represents the viscous end of a wasteful lifestyle. For Pinocchio, who at this point has turned into a donkey due to

his foolish ways, the shark allows him to turn his life around. He permits himself to be completely consumed by the shark and thus leaves behind the life of idolatry that he first knew for a life of devotion and sacrifice. As one can see, throughout *Pinocchio*, symbolism is used to subconsciously influence the minds of the children who read the story. Collodi's *Pinocchio* is the classic example of an author's use of theme and symbols to convey a pointed message about how children should and should not act. This example would persevere throughout the history of children's literature.

While children's literature has often been used as a didactic instrument, the simplistic stories have also served as camouflage for sinister political propaganda. This genre, also known as satire, was not originally directed at children, yet the comic nature of these stories such as Voltaire's *Candide* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* made them ideal for entertaining children. As with stories like *Pinocchio*, these political tales use symbolism in order to influence the reader. While satire was popular in Europe, such tales were yet to reach America until the late 1800's when Frank Baum wrote *The Wizard of Oz*. In this story, Baum employs multiple symbols in order to support the populist platform of the mid nineteenth century. In the story, the silver shoes represent the populist silver standard they so fervently stood behind. The yellow brick road symbolizes the gold standard of the day that destroyed the farmers from Kansas. The great city of Oz derives its name from the financial center New York – NY (both letters alphabetically one before Oz). The characters as well all occupy places of symbolic importance. The Scarecrow is the idealistic Kansas farmer; the Tin man meanwhile represents eastern industrialism. The lion however represents William Jennings Bryan himself, the spokesperson of the populist movement. Throughout the story, these

references occur time and time again. In his 1964 article *The Wizard of Oz: A Parable on Populism*, Henry Littlefield says, “The relationship and analogies outlined . . . are admittedly theoretical, but they are far too consistent to be coincidental, and they furnish a teaching mechanism which is guaranteed to read any level of student.”⁷

In essence, what gives *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* its biting, sarcastic power is Baum’s dedication to the fantastical elements of the story. By ensuring that no child today has not heard of Dorothy or Toto and their adventures in Oz, Baum guaranteed himself a captive audience who, as it matures, cannot help itself but dig further into this tale. Baum himself said, “The story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written solely to please the children of today.”⁸ Littlefield concurs, yet claims “. . . Baum never allowed the consistency of the allegory to take precedence over the theme of youthful entertainment. Yet once discovered, the author’s allegorical intent seems clear, and it gives depth and lasting interest even to children who only sense something beneath the surface of the story.”⁹ In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Baum adopts the European genre of satire for the American population. Though younger children are not necessarily alert to the deeper significance of the stories, they are subconsciously influenced by the deception they see in Oz, the power of the ruby slippers, the associations of directions with the different witches, and the general relationships between the characters. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a sort of fairy tale for America. Baum effectively uses issues of American society to construct a didactic tale that teaches children how they should and should not act and what behavior and desires are socially acceptable. Any child who has

⁷Littlefield, Henry, *The Wizard of Oz: A Parable on Populism* . *American Quarterly* 16, 1964 pg47 -58

⁸Littlefield, Henry, *The Wizard of Oz: A Parable on Populism* . *American Quarterly* 16, 1964 pg47 -58

⁹Littlefield, Henry, *The Wizard of Oz: A Parable on Populism* . *American Quarterly* 1964, 1964 pg47 -58

seen the film version will be able to recite “there’s no place like home,” especially when that home embodies the warmth of family found on the Kansas plains.

L. Frank Baum is significant to American Children’s literature because he brings the fairy tale and satirical genre to America. When one reads *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a parable on populism, one can see how American literature changed. Before the publication of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, children’s literature had seen a change from the very serious tone of early Puritan works, to stories invented for only entertainment. In *The Wizard of Oz*, as with all satire, Baum uses entertainment to suggest lessons and morals. Thus, the tradition of children’s literature as a tool of entertainment continues in America, yet unlike Collodi, Baum allows his premier objective to be entertainment. In appealing to the subjective side of humanity before the logical side, Baum captures his audience. Unlike Collodi, who without the Disney film of *Pinocchio* would be largely lost to the American population, Baum is able to enchant this audience. By entrancing his audience in wonder and allowing the astute reader to discern his satire, Baum creates a parable that will speak to readers for generations and exercise profound influence for many years to come; a trait Collodi could hardly accomplish.

Baum started a trend of subtle political and cultural messages in American culture which would continue throughout the twentieth century, not necessarily in literature, but in one of the most important cultural influences: the movies. The Walt Disney Studios use their film adaptations of well-known fairy tales in order to bestow upon young children their interpretation of what society should imitate.

The power of the Disney films, according to Bonnie Rudner, professor of children’s literature at Boston College, is in the subtle manner they present a way of life

as if the opinions and lifestyles of the heroes are the only ways to live, and these motifs are reinforced time and time again. “In every Disney movie, the moment you hear the words; ‘so much for true love,’ you know the speaker is about to get it.”¹⁰ Through intricate characterization of the animated icons, the Disney studios reward the character who is not necessarily the most deserving person, but who is the most American in his or her way of life. Often, these characters seem to objectify race relations in order to justify Anglo-Saxon colonialism. Disney floods the world of the youngest of children not only with their films, but with their own publishing company (Hyperion), the theme parks, the television shows, and the ever present Disney merchandise. It is estimated that in the life of the average American child, Disney controls 66%¹¹ of their daily entertainment. Thus the American ideology is not the same goals as the forefathers, but rather the mantra presented to the American youth by Disney. Through the Disney films *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Pocahontas*, one can witness how in the heyday of the politically correct 1990’s, Disney camouflaged new criticism and political efforts with the restrained current of ingeniously proclaiming the triumph of the American way of life.

The movie *Aladdin* appeared in theatres in the early 1990’s, shortly after the conclusion of the Gulf War. The film derives its story from the Ancient Arabic “fairy tale” collection of *1,001 Arabian Nights*. In the original tale, the character of Aladdin is a detestable street urchin who abuses his mother with his laziness. When the Genie becomes his slave, he treats him as such and only through magic is he able to command the love of the fair princess. As a modern reader peruses Scheherazade’s words, one

¹⁰Rudner, Bonnie “Disney and the Wondertale”, class 10/02

¹¹www.disney.com

cannot help but hope Aladdin fails. Yet to the ancient Arabs, it was his cunning and ingenuity that they praised; not his vibrant work ethic and high morals.

The movie, from the beginning, condescends to the Middle East. In fact, when the film was released in theatres, a passage in the opening song entitled “Arabian Nights” said of the Middle East “Oh I come from a land from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face, its barbaric but hey its home.”¹² Disney received such a great magnitude of complaints about the insensitivity of that line that when the film became available on video, the new interpretation went “where it’s hot and immense and the heat is intense.”¹³ As well, in the same opening song, one line reads, “... where the winds from the East and the Sun’s from the West...”¹⁴ In this line, the wind from the east represents the winds of change, sweeping through the Middle East after the Gulf War and bringing along the sun of hope and prosperity from the benevolent West. From the beginning, Disney takes this ancient Arab tale and turns it into a vehicle for western propaganda of cultural superiority. Yet the average viewer does not see this, choosing only to delight in the revel of Aladdin and his friends as they defeat the villains and true love triumphs once again.

When Disney adapted the story, Aladdin became the all-American boy; not content with his impoverished life and yet trapped by it. Still, despite his lack of financial stability, Aladdin is still able to be a kind human being who will sacrifice what little he has to those who have even less (as evident a scene where he gives his meager half of bread to two orphaned children roaming the streets). Aladdin is intelligent, as he is able to convince the Genie into giving him an extra wish, yet succeeds in the end because of

¹² *Aladdin* Walt Disney Studios, 1992

¹³ *Aladdin* Walt Disney Studios, 1992

¹⁴ *Aladdin* Walt Disney Studios, 1992

his heart. Aladdin truly becomes a prince at the end of the story not because he forces the Genie to turn him into one, but rather because he frees the Genie. Disney drastically changes the personality of Aladdin from the book and makes him into every American's dream child, a funny, intelligent, hardworking individual with a heart of gold. Aladdin is truly the full recognition of the Horatio Alger myth.

Though the story is meant to take place in the Middle East, Aladdin does not look Middle Eastern. While his skin is darker, the rest of his features uniquely identify him as an American. This is significant because it demonstrates one facet of the manner in which the Disney studios attempt to whiten the Middle East in this film. In fact, the only character who looks distinctly middle-eastern is the villain, Jafar. Bonnie Rudner says "With his twisting bird, elongated face, and turban atop his head, one can't help but think of Jafar as a sort of Saddam Hussein type figure, and Aladdin's final triumph over him can be seen as the extreme triumph of Western kindness over Middle Eastern corruption."¹⁵

Perhaps even more disturbing than the characterization of Aladdin and Jafar is the animation of the Genie. Voiced by Robin Williams, the Genie represents everything that is American. Some critics even go so far as to suggest that the Genie might represent Walt Disney himself. Throughout the film, the Genie makes references to Disney characters from Goofy to Sebastian the Crab (*The Little Mermaid*). As well, he imitates staple bits of Americana, such as the *Ed Sullivan Show* and the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Genie simply embodies American culture. He is the complete opposite of the Jafar character who detests everything that the Genie represents. The Genie is the true hero of the movie, for without him, Aladdin might still be trapped at the bottom of

¹⁵Rudner, Bonnie "Disney and the Wondertale" class 11/02

the Cave of Wonders where he went to retrieve the magic lamp. The Genie, in his simplistic moralizing, brings to the harsh Middle Eastern world a sort of sanity, joie de vivre, as well as teaching everyone about the true meaning of the word “friendship”. Along with Aladdin, the characterization of the Genie brings the American style of living to the Middle East and, at the end of the film, the Middle East is better off for it.

Continuing with the theme of western superiority evident in *Aladdin*, the hit movie *The Lion King* contains some frightening views on urban America as well as homosexuality. It is only through the American hero that the insidious side of life is corrected and virtue triumphs over evil.

While the hero Simba, like Aladdin, represents the inquisitive, courageous hero Americans love to love, there are darker sides to the road the animators chose to pursue with his characterization. While the film takes place in Africa, and many of the animated characters are voiced by Africans, Simba is voiced by white, American established actors: Jonathan Taylor Thomas (Simba as a child) and Matthew Broderick (Simba as an adult). In choosing the vocal talent for the main character in this fashion, Disney inherently claims that a black voice would not be sufficient enough for their main character. A representative from the Disney studios claims “Disney had no ulterior motive in the selection of vocal talent for *The Lion King*. We chose whom we felt best fit the part and would appeal to the general public. If the film had been considered racist, why would such notable actors such as Whoopi Goldberg and James Earl Jones have consented to partake in this epic project?”¹⁶

¹⁶Source unknown. Rudner, Bonnie “Disney and the Wondertale” class 12/03

“I would like to ask them what they were thinking,” states Professor Rudner, “did they really know what the repercussions of their actions would be?”¹⁷ Indeed, the hyena characters of which Whoopi Goldberg lent her voice to draw particular controversy to the film. Many critics regard the hyenas as symbolic of urban blacks. They are lazy, simply grouse around all day complaining about how they have no food. Essentially, they are scavengers. Only through Simba’s humane actions do the scavenger hyenas become righteous characters. In presenting this view of urban, black America and at the end suggesting that the only way to revitalize black America is the generous benefaction of superior white Americans. *The Lion King* demonstrates how even in the politically correct society America claims to be, an undercurrent of racial tension still emanates through pop culture and flourishes.

This theme is explored and further developed in the nineteen ninety-seven film *Pocahontas*. Under the guise of presenting a story about how Native Americans and the white settlers got along learned to accept each other’s differences and come to live in peace, Disney in fact justifies colonialism and the resulting genocide. Disney again uses subtle manners in order to convey a propaganda message which support everything that early American settlers did to the new world upon which they settled. By supporting this message, Disney advances their political goal of proving to American children that America truly is an noble country and merely the victim of bad press.

In the movie *Pocahontas*, John Smith represents “the good colonialist”. Though he arrives in the new world with a reputation as an “Indian killer”, he quickly develops an open mind and through his relationship with Pocahontas, makes an effort to learn about the Native American culture. However, the hidden undertones of their rapport manifest

¹⁷Rudner, Bonnie “Disney and the Wondertale” class 12/03

something different. Throughout the film, Pocahontas moves like an animal, affiliating her with nature yet at the same time these primal actions portray her as being less than human. John Smith on the other hand is tall, handsome and strong. He is the epitome of the knight in shining armor racing off to find the damsel in distress. Therefore, even though the two characters act as equals, the audience is subconsciously prejudiced into believing Pocahontas to be somewhat of a lower species than John Smith. As well, at the end of the film, the two lovers do not remain together. Because of their relationship, the white settlers and the Native Americans are able to learn to live in peace. Yet when analyzed in the course of history, what Disney is really doing through this ending is mitigating the countless swarms of colonists who were about to arrive from England bearing less than goodwill, coming with disease and destruction which would see the desolation of the Native American population. Thus while in the Disney film, Pocahontas is a hero for her people, in reality she is nothing more than a traitor who allowed her people to be enslaved by the ruthless white settlers.

One must now ask why Disney chose such a covert way to spread their message. One suggestion, according to literary critic Jack Zipes, is that the Walt Disney Company is primarily a foundation of American culture. Therefore, the Disney studios must promote fundamental American ideology such as manifest destiny, the idolization of the cowboy hero, and freedom of choice as demonstrated in the line heard throughout so many Disney films "true love conquers all". However, at the same time, Disney seeks to preserve the status quo and though many of their new movies, such as *Mulan* and *Lilo and Stitch* portray diverse cultures in a positive light, the old (and best grossing box

office films) tend to favor conservative yet patriotic American ideals and old-fashioned white superiority.¹⁸

Disney denies all claims of racism, sexism, and having a secret political agenda in their films. According to Reuters News Magazine, Michael Eisner, president of the Disney Corporation, says; “in a major statement confronting his company's critics, stopped short of draping Disney in absolute First Amendment freedom of speech protection. He labeled the company's creators as ‘editors’ and said Disney accepts responsibility for its products. ‘If we sometimes make choices with which others disagree, it is not because we have failed to look hard at our decisions. Sometimes we will make the wrong choice. Hopefully, we will more often make the right choice.’ He charged some groups with ‘wanting to leverage our strength with the public for their own ends, trade on our popularity, if you will,”¹⁹ yet the truth of the matter is these ideas are in these movies. Whether or not Disney intended them to be found, critics have found them and the effects are obvious on American youth. In a class of 40 students concerning Disney taught at Boston College fall semester 2002, 38 of the students believed they had seen every Disney movie to date and profoundly believed their outlooks to life to be based on a fairy tale approach. Of those 38, 35 believed in the concept of love at first sight and the inherent triumph of good over evil. In terms of the political agenda of Disney, most of those students agreed with the cultural critics that Disney secretly sought to capture the minds of American youth and make them think in a certain manner. One student, Renee Lindo states “... I used to watch the Disney afternoon all the time. I thought the women in the movies were very pretty, and that I wanted to be like them. But

¹⁸ Zipes, Jack. *Whatever Happened to the Fairy Tale?* 1995

¹⁹ Reuters News Magazine, January 5, 1998

they were all very passive...and seemed so helpless...I was also upset that that they had really, as I now realize, unrealistic physical forms, and it depressed me that I could never look like that.”²⁰

Though Disney might have never intended for the references in their films to be taken in a serious manner, the fact is that they are present and young children do pick up on the messages. Along with Collodi and Frank Baum, one can witness the power of literature and entertainment for children as a didactic tool meant to influence the youth of a culture in the societal and political status quo of a country. Disney films are reflective of American culture because they mirror the values that the country is based upon. Through the latest films Disney has produced, one can see that multiculturalism is becoming an ever -pressing issue. Yet where is America coming from as a nation and have real strides been made through political correctness? Has political correctness merely camouflaged the greater problem of natural racism in a melting pot society? Disney's multiple attempts at displaying multicultural elements within their films leads one to believe that while broadening the cultural awareness of American youth is an important issue, perhaps even more important is learning to love America. Until America truly becomes a melting pot society, unfortunately, the two will never join.

Similar elements can be found in children's literature of today. While children's media strives to prove how politically correct their industry is, the children suffer from prejudices camouflaged in texts. Yet, strides are being made from the past in and modern era, more and more positive images of culture are becoming visible in texts. In order to fully analyze this predicament, one must first look at the state of multicultural children's

²⁰Interview conducted with Renee Lindo 11/25/03

literature before the cultural revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, then examine how it changed during that period and finally study where we stand today. Through this study, it will become apparent that while children's literature today still proves important as a didactic, educational tool, the lessons children are learning in today's society are not the lessons of political agendas and hatred, but rather important instructions about how to live in harmony with the ever-shrinking world.

Chapter Two:

The beginning of the era of multiculturalism

Since the mixing of races began to occur, multiculturalism has been an issue and so long as humans continue to live in a melting pot society, racial representation will continue to be a hot topic of debate. Even its definition remains wide open to controversy. In its most basic form, the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* defines multiculturalism as "The existence, recognition or preservation of different cultures or cultural identity within a unified society."²¹ Though such a definition does tackle many of the issues of multiculturalism, it only begins to hint at the great expanses of what such a word can entail. The employment of the word "multicultural" has evolved from a symptom of a non-unified society in the early part of America's history, to a hidden truth in the first half of the nineteenth century, and finally an issue in the forefront

²¹Nichols et al. *Random House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 1999

of all children's literature with Nancy Larrick's alarming 1965 piece "The All - White World of Children's Literature". Since 1965, the amount of cultural publishing occurring in America is phenomenal. Perhaps an even greater success is the change within American society from a divided society in search of social consciousness towards a more unified humanity.

In its essential definition, the word *multiculturalism* comprises of two parts: culture and society. Multiple cultures must exist within the society and all those cultures must strive for mutual understanding of the role each plays within civilization. Therefore, when one studies multicultural literature, one is not searching for books about minorities or books depicting minorities, but rather one must also analyze the manner such a book is accepted into society, and how the book portrays cultures living together in mutual understanding. In the first half of the 20th century, literature failed to do so. As a society for the most part comprised of immigrants, there was little tradition of American tales or lore that arose from a direct American experience save for the tall tales of the west and the oral tradition of the Native - Americans. But in the 1900's, few people knew of such stories. Instead, the books children received to read were the same stories their British counterparts received. These books were safe since Americans were still reeling from the effects of the Civil War that ended not 40 years prior. Many Americans still felt very divided and unsure of themselves as to what directly unified the country. Books such as Robert Louis Stevens' *A Child's Garden of Verses* were heralded for their simplicity and much more subtly, for their lack of personality. Any book which directly tried to speak of slavery, or industrial abuse, or immigration was quickly pushed to the back of the shelf and seen much more as an embarrassment than a step in the right

direction towards unifying society. Some publishing houses attempted to publish such controversial books, but because these cultural experiments failed to turn a profit, editors chosen not to publish any book that featured culture as anything more than just an element to be ridiculed. Black citizens always took on the role of either the lazy, ignorant man who must be educated by a generous white man or the savage. Examples include *Little Black Sambo*, *Little White Squibb* versus *Little Black Sambo* and *The Little Lazy Zulu*. All these books present African-Americans through their words and illustrations, as somehow less than human and without the capacity to function in a common, civilized society. As well, it was not the black citizens who were writing these stories because they were denied the same education as white citizens. As Virginia Woolf claimed in her text *A Room of One's Own*, "one . . . must have money and a room of one's own to write."²² Minorities such as former slaves and immigrants were simply denied these two things. Thus, instead of having the luxury of writing and celebrating their culture, the non-whites of America were forced to live in drudgery merely to survive. As a result, any representation of minorities in books came from a white perspective. Therefore, in the Pecos Bill tales, the settlers are always seen as triumphing over the savage Native Americans. The Mexicans are always wild beasts, marauding the good white colonialists. Poor white children could maybe escape their awful situation through hard work as in Horatio Alger's, yet an immigrant could never be anything but poor. In general, any culture different from aristocratic, white society was either ignored completely or ridiculed in early children's literature. As time passed, gradually certain liberal intellectuals began to notice the lack of any sort of cultural representation in children's literature and created the Council for Interracial Books for Children which operates on

²²Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own* 1929

the principle "that given encouragement, authors and artists will create good children's books that include nonwhites and that given the manuscripts, publishers will produce and market them."²³ The council's founders, which include Benjamin Spock and Langston Hughes, felt that through offering incentives, authors and publishers alike would feel inclined towards creating quality books that represent culture in a positive light. The Council for Interracial Books still exists today.

Yet the question remains to be asked, what is the importance of multiculturalism in children's literature? Does a child actually need to read about other cultures in order to understand and appreciate them, or through daily experience can cultural issues be comprehended? Rutgers professor Katherine Vandergrift states, "an acquaintance with and an understanding of literary characters is one of the first ways a young child has of making sense of what it is to be human. The events of story are a means of exploration of the world, helping [the child] to confirm, to illuminate and extend her own life experiences..."²⁴ What Ms. Vandergrift implies is that through literature, children learn about themselves and about the world around them. For many children who do not live in diverse communities, literature may be the only way for them to experience new and different cultures. Through education then, children may learn to accept others and thus end the senseless prejudices held within society. Vandergrift claims "Story gives public form to private meanings and thus helps those who receive its messages to reach out to other human beings around the world knowing that they share some . . . same concerns

²³ Larrick, Nancy "The All White World of Children's Books". *Saturday Review of Literature* 9/11/65 pg. 85

²⁴ Vandergrift, Kay, "Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page" www.scils.rutgers.edu/ChildrenLit/index.html

and feelings." ²⁵ Therefore, the lack of cultural diversity within literature hinders the education of the American child and must be addressed.

In 1965, a former school teacher and president of the International Reader's Association as well as a respected scholar on childhood education wrote a piece which would remove the blinders from the eyes not only of the American public but also the publishing industry. Nancy Larrick's article "The All-White World of Children's Literature", published in the Saturday Review of Literature, sought to examine what Ms. Larrick considered to be "one of the most critical issues in American education today; the almost complete omission of the Negro from the books for children" ²⁶. The article begins with a simple premise, to examine the state of multicultural issues within our society, present the reader with the drastic truths about why the situation is where it is, and offer up a solution as to what responsible Americans should do about it. In essence, Larrick hoped to administer a wake-up call to the American population.

Larrick begins her article by stating that 16% ²⁷ of all American children in kindergarten through high school are non-white; minority cultures are represented in about six percent of children's literature. Larrick states:

"There is no need to elaborate upon the damage - much of it irreparable - to the Negro child's personality. But the impact of all -white books upon 39,600,000 white children is probably even worse. Although his light skin makes him one of the world's minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world

²⁵ Vandergrift, Kay, "Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page" www.scils.rutgers.edu/ChildrenLit/index.html

²⁶ Larrick, Nancy "The All-White World of Children's Books". Saturday Review of Literature 9/11/65 pg. 63

²⁷ statistic from 1965

conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books."²⁸

Essentially, Larrick argues that lack of diversity in the early developmental stages of childhood is harmful to all parties involved. To the minority child, only seeing white children in books immediately creates feelings of inferiority and ineptitude, as well as exclusion, isolation and resentment. On the other hand, the white child who learns nothing of what her 6,340,000 other compatriots live like, continues to grow, set and close-minded in her ways of the world and truly does believe that it is only her lifestyle which holds any sort of importance. One can easily witness the subtle, cruel hand in which racism enigmatically enters a society.

The second part of "The All-White World of Children's Literature" explains the study Larrick conducted in order to examine the true state of children's literature in today's society. Larrick surveyed 5,000 trade books published by seventy members of the Children's Book Council between the years 1962-1964. Aided by sixty-three of those seventy houses, Larrick determined that "the vast majority of recent books are as white as the segregated zoo"²⁹ of Golden Press. Of the 5,206 children's trade books launched by the sixty-three publishers in the three year period, only 349 include one or more Negroes - an average of 6.7%.³⁰ For the most part, these books consist mainly of one or two dark faces in a crowd, and "almost 60% of the books with Negroes are placed outside of continental United States or before World War II... most of them show away of life... so far removed from that of the contemporary Negro... To the child who has been

²⁸ Larrick, Nancy "The All White World of Children's Books". Saturday Review of Literature 9/11/65 pg. 63

²⁹ in *A Visit to the Zoo* published by the Golden Books press, a child describes a day at the Central Park Zoo in Manhattan. Not one non-white person is pictured.

³⁰ Larrick, Nancy "The All White World of Children's Books". Saturday Review of Literature 9/11/65 pg. 64

involved in the civil rights demonstrations . . . it is small comfort to read of the Negro slaves smilingly serving his master." ³¹

In response to Larrick, the publishing houses argue that books that represent black children do not sell. She cites the example of a book entitled Counting Rhymes published by Golden Press. In response to a rhyme "Three babes in a basket/and only room for two/and one was yellow and one was black/and one had eyes of blue", an irate Mississippi mother denounced Golden Press saying:

"I was horrified when I was reading this to my innocent young child and behold, on page 15 there was actually the picture of three small children in a basket together... and one was a little Negro! I put my child and the book down and immediately called the drug store owner and told him he would no longer have any more of my business... if he didn't take all the rest of his copies of that book off the shelves." ³²

Though sad, publishing houses are being forced to cater to people like w. A sales manager says "why jeopardize sales by putting one or two Negro faces in an illustration?" Larrick continuously emphasizes throughout her article how children's books published between 1962 and 1964 neglect the better interest of the child in return for a greater profit.

³¹Larrick, Nancy "The All White World of Children's Books".

Saturday Review of Literature 9/11/65 pg. 64

³²Larrick, Nancy "The All White World of Children's Books".

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However, the conclusion of "The All-White World of Children's Literature" leaves the reader with a greater sense of hope than Larrick's dreadful statistics do. She speaks of the Council for Interracial Books as mentioned in this chapter and ends her article with the statement "the Council... can accomplish a great deal simply by reminding editors and publishers that what is good for the Klu Klux Klan is not necessarily good for America - or for the book business. White supremacy... will be abolished when authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers decide that they need not submit to bigots"³³. In essence, Larrick appeals for all Americans to listen to their inner moral conscience and decide what is best for the America is not to continue hatred, but rather to educate.

"The All-White World of Children's Literature" performs two very important tasks. Firstly, it outlines the situation of multiculturalism within children's literature in the 1960's. Books that often sacrificed reality in order to eliminate culture from the words and illustrations were commonplace. In a society when cultures live and mix in such close proximity as the United States, the lack of cultural representation within literature, according to Larrick, harms children by creating on one hand a sense of ignorance and on another hand a sense of defeat. Therefore, Larrick emphasizes the importance of literature as an educational tool and claims rightfully so that children's literature in the 60's does not live up to the standard of education and help to foster the ideas that form the basis of American ideology.

Larrick's call for more quality representation of culture demonstrates the manner in which the first calls for multiculturalism in children's literature came in a separate but equal manner. Though Larrick desires more representation for cultural issues, she claims that just drawing multicultural illustrations is not enough. Instead, attention has to be

³³Larrick, Nancy "The All-White World of Children's Books". Saturday Review of Literature 9/11/65 pg. 85

called within the text to the various cultures in the book. Thus, culture will always be an issue, never fully blended into society but rather something to be singled out and learned about. The 60's and 70's saw an appeal for greater multicultural acceptance in society, yet still identify culture as "other" - something separate from the greater whole. Until literature can be used as a tool to encourage integration, multicultural literature will always create problems.

Larrick's article saw a collection of immediate consequences. It served as a rallying cry to intellectuals, philanthropists, and politicians everywhere desperate to solve the country's racial problems. In 1970, the Council for Interracial Books repeated Larrick's study and found that the 2 years following her article saw an instantaneous spike in the publication of books that prominently featured African-Americans. 200% more of these books were published. However, in 1968, the number of multicultural books once again dropped to the levels Larrick had found in her original survey. Multicultural children's literature still had a long journey to make. However, more permanent than the rise in publications, "The All-White World of Children's Literature" inspired the creation of the Coretta Scott King Award. This award with the intent to honor quality books for and by African-Americans generated the necessary demand to keep those books on the market. The creation of the award as well creates interest among the public to read certain books they might not have read to begin with. In all, the award awakened a sleeping American public to the possibility of diversity within literature.

However, many Americans took it upon themselves to crusade for greater cultural representation in literature. Though this vivacity might on the outside appear to be a step in the right direction, blind passion often produces more problems than it solves. In

America, a sudden push by publishers to flood the market with African -American books caused many books that would not have been published otherwise to be published. As well, many Americans began to call for censorship of books already published which they felt portrayed minorities in a derogatory manner. One such book, *Little Black Sambo*, illustrates the manner in which a very popular book suddenly fell in disfavor due to the sudden movement towards political correctness. So while children were suddenly able to read about African -American children, they were only being allowed to see an idealized version of African -American culture and suddenly lost their freedom of speech. Censorship ran rampant as many books were stripped from the shelves. Censorship damaged the American quest towards literary unity because allowed only one side of an issue to be presented, depending on what the people in power believed. It is this subjective nature that made censorship so dangerous.

A greater problem in the 1960's, few books if any showed minority cultures as being naturally integrated into society. One reason for this is, unfortunate as it seems, few minorities were naturally integrated into American society in the 60's. Instead, minorities tended to dwell in inner city ghettos and reserved, isolated pockets on the fringe of society. As times change, all cultures begin to resemble a true melting pot, more and more children's novels display children of all cultures interacting together. With each year, as society becomes more and more tolerant of differences, fewer sensors are placed upon books and a greater emphasis upon learning with each other rather than learning about each other exists. For example, publishing company "Barefoot Books" was created as a small company in England in 1993 with the sole intent of publishing children's books which draw attention to culture. Today, the company has expanded to

have a US office and publishes over 100 titles per annum. Internationally recognized for their outstanding efforts, Barefoot Books claims “ Taking our inspiration from many different cultures, we focus on the themes that encourage independence of spirit, enthusiasm for learning, and acceptance of other traditions. Thoughtfully prepared by writers, artists and storytellers from all over the world, our products combine the best of the present with the best of the past to educate our children as the caretakers of tomorrow.”³⁴

However, though society has come a long way since the 60's, much work still has to be done. For example, at Scholastic Books in New York, when packaging books are constructed to be uniformly sent to children throughout the country, editors are still instructed not to place any books that portray strong elements of multiculturalism into the package because they still receive many complaints from "concerned" parents.

Nancy Larrick's article stirred American consciousness to the importance of multiculturalism within children's literature. Her work focused on the state of children's literature, and Larrick's response to what must be done to solve the problems. Her article started a long trend of representing culture in a separate yet equal way. In our rapidly shrinking world of today, children's literature tends to focus not only on representing culture but showing multiple cultures interacting. Though society has come a long way from the days when black and white children could not be pictured together, much work still must be done.

³⁴www.barefootbooks.com

Chapter Three: From Sambo to Sam

Though multicultural themes in children's literature have always been present, the focus of diversity has vastly shifted from just showing different races to presenting race and culture as a learning experience. One can witness and comprehend this theme through an in-depth examination of two books: *Little Black Sambo*, published in 1898 and wildly popular in the United States until the 1970's, and *Sam and the Tigers*, the modern rewrite of the Sambo story written in 1996. Through these two stories operate on the same basic plot line, the illustrations and linguistic approach demonstrate the vast shift from multiculturalism as a matter of ridicule to a matter of pride. As well, the differences in these two books represent the continuing use of Children's literature for didactic purposes as well as entertainment. Through the stories of *Little Black Sambo* and *Sam and the Tigers*, one can witness the manner in which the ideals of Nancy Larrick are being fulfilled in today's society as Americans gradually learn to accept other cultures.

Before the 1970's, as illustrated in "The All-White World of Children's Books", children's books operated on the same "separate but equal" principles that dominated American politics throughout the civil rights era. The significance of this focus is twofold. First of all, while the country cried for social justice, the actions of the American public still showed that the dollar could not be earned in the mixing of races but rather in keeping races and cultures separate. Each was allowed to honor his or her own heroes, yet still a black person could not be a hero in a white book. In fact, whenever races were mixed, such as in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the hero of the book remained white. Lee claimed to counter this stereotype by having a white

villain as well. However, Americans would not support a book that gave power to African-Americans. While on a superficial level, Americans supported the principles of the Civil Rights Movement, the reality of their actions implied that white Americans were not prepared to consider African-Americans as their equals and thus educate their children about racial cooperation.

In the 1960's, according to the textbook *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, children's books used for educative purposes still possessed a very didactic, very dry style. Most children learned to read on the *Spot* books that failed to challenge students to think in creative manners. With lines such as "See Dick. See Jane. See Spot. See Spot run", these books appeared to be trite and insubstantial. In this climate, as silly children's tale from India entitled *Little Black Sambo*, was one of the most wildly popular stories for children to learn to read. Helen Bannerman, the wife of a British soldier in colonized India, wrote the story to entertain her two young children on a train trip. The tale, though simple, symbolized the greatest problem with multicultural children's literature until the Civil Rights movement. Through illustrations and textual linguistics, Bannerman succeeds in isolating, ridiculing, and perpetuating stereotypes about the African people she had never before been in contact with.

When Bannerman first published *Little Black Sambo* in 1898 it "earned Bannerman recognition as an innovator in picture books. At the time, her bright, unrefined illustrations, suspenseful narrative, and rhythmic sentences were considered unique."³⁵ While Bannerman never intended to publish her stories, she did so at the insistence of her children and her friends who delighted in her tales. The story takes place in an abstract location. While Sambo looks as if he could be African, the presence

³⁵ www.pancakeparlour.com/Highlights/Thefuture/Short_Stories/Bannerman/bannerman.html

of the tigers suggests a more Asian location. In this imaginary setting, the hero, Sambo, dons himself in the brightest apparel his parents can make and sets off into the jungle where he encounters four tigers. When each tiger threatens to eat Sambo, he thwarts their plans by offering them a piece of his clothing. The tigers subsequently argue over who has the finest piece of apparel then chase each other in a circle so quickly that they melt into butter. Later in the day, Sambo's father, Black Jumbo, retrieves the butter and his mother, Black Mumbo, makes the butter into pancakes. The story ends with Little Black Sambo devouring 169 tiger streaked pancakes.

The story appears fanciful and ingenious enough. Indeed, thousands of children enjoyed the tale, making it one of Golden Books' best selling stories. While in simple narration, the story seems innocent enough, and Sambo an ingenious black hero, the racial implications of *Little Black Sambo* extend far beyond the plot lines. Much of the controversy surrounding *Little Black Sambo* surrounds the names used throughout the story. First of all, the name "Sambo" has been used as a racial slur, with much of the same implications as the word "hambone". The name grew in popularity during the blackface vaudeville performances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In using the name "Sambo" for the hero, Bannerman may have just been employing a word she had heard over and over again via popular culture, yet she perpetuated the stereotype that even a little black boy with the intelligence to outwit tigers was nothing more than something almost less than human. In one little title, Bannerman paints "Sambo" as a figure with no more substantial purpose in life than to entertain, be laughed at and mocked by whites. Bannerman employs these same methods of trivialization with the names she bestows upon Sambo's parents. The first three pages of *Little Black Sambo*

demonstrate the manner in which Bannerman subconsciously belittles the African people.

In fact, the book commences with the three lines "Once upon a time there was a little black boy, and his name was Little Black Sambo. And his mother was called Black Mumbo. And his father was called Black Jumbo."³⁶ Right at the beginning, Bannerman associates Sambo's parents with the word "mumbo jumbo" which can be seen as a comment on the fact that Africans were often seen as incomprehensible and constantly mumbling. Through the names Bannerman bestows upon her characters, her views of Africans as less than human becomes apparent. As the story continues, the lack of any sort of character development and presentation of ridiculous situations further cements the trivialization of Africans.

The first action the reader sees Sambo perform is donning the red coat, blue trousers, green umbrella, and purple shoes with crimson souls with crimson lining. Sambo has no choice in what he wears; his parents just automatically give him such an unusual outfit. Again, every action in the beginning of this story serves to present Sambo, his family, and thus the entire African culture as trite and something to be laughed at rather than human beings meant to be taken seriously. When Sambo encounters the four tigers, he does not decipher a method with which to deceive them, but rather lets the tigers lead him. "...and by and by came a Tiger. And the Tiger said to him, 'Little Black Sambo, I'm going to eat you up! So the Tiger said, 'very well, I won't eat you this time, but you must give me your beautiful little Red Coat.' So the Tiger got poor Little Black Sambo's beautiful little Red Coat, and went away,"³⁷ states Bannerman when Sambo meets the tiger. The tiger makes all the decisions and therefore holds all the

³⁶Bannerman, Helen *Little Black Sambo*

³⁷Bannerman, Helen *Little Black Sambo*

power. Sambo takes a very passive stance when confronting the tigers and therefore essentially establishes himself as somewhat even beneath the animals. At the end of the story, Sambo does not even take any initiative in resolving his situation. Instead, Sambo sits back and lets life happen to him, much in the same way that the slaves were supposed to lead passive lives. The simple text portrays Africans as being slow, unintelligent and definitely not the equivalent of the superior white race.

In addition to the text, the drawings portray African-Americans in a degrading manner. On the cover of the first American print run of the book, Sambo appears on the ornate front cover in his fine, colorful apparel with a face that seems to resemble not an actual person, but rather the blackface vaudeville performers of the 1920's. Sambo's hair is in an Afro, his lips are largely exaggerated, and his eyes shine brightly against his dark skin. As one can see in the illustrations below, Sambo and his family are a caricature of everything that causes prejudices against Africans.



Bannerman, who in her life had never seen a black person in her life, knew only what the race looked like from the popular culture, namely “cute” little cartoons she had seen in the socially elite magazines available on the military base where she lived. Sambo's parents as well are completely unbelievable people. His mother appears like the good plantation slave, slightly chubby in flowing skirts with her hair wrapped in a

bandana. His father too is stereotypical. He is tall and skinny, with frizzy hair, thick lips wearing a completely silly pinstripe suit. His parents represent the stereotypical Africans and appear to be ridiculous rather than substantial.



The illustrations continue to portray Sambo and his family as colloquial and simple rather than as charming actual people. However, one question remains: did Bannerman intend for her book to come across as racist or rather does a new historical reading of *Little Black Sambo* lead us to view the book in this manner?

In a letter to the London Times in 1972, Helen Bannerman's youngest son Robert stated "my mother would not have published [*Little Black Sambo*] if she had dreamt for one moment that even one small boy would have been made unhappy thereby"³⁸. Robert's letter came at a time when *Little Black Sambo* was coming under fire both in America and other English speaking countries around the globe. Critics universally condemned the books finding the illustrations to be nothing more than "malicious

³⁸ www.pancakeparlour.com/Highlights/Thefuture/Short_Stories/Bannerman/bannerman.html

cartoons."³⁹ The most likely answer to the question of racial slander in *Little Black Sambo* is that when Bannerman originally wrote the stories, she infused them with all the basic elements of story; plot, conflict, resolution, and character in order to entertain. Bannerman was a society woman who never had any contact with Africans and therefore did not know any more than what she saw in her ladies magazines of the time. Despite the bad name *Little Black Sambo* has received throughout the years, the book was not written with a malicious intent, rather just to provide entertainment to children everywhere.

In the 1970's, America weathered a revolution in which citizens attempted to apologize for years of cultural ignorance. Advances were made in social policy that not only attempted to alter the legal retributions to acts of racial terrorism, but as well to fundamentally change the manner of thinking of the general populace. Unfortunately, the radical fervor of the era swept through American cities as people chose to fight generations of ignorance by creating more ignorance. A children's book, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, was written in 1953, in some ways predicting the wave of censorship that washed over the nation. All around, people pulled from library shelves and schools any book thought of to be racist. While many of these stories, like *Little Black Sambo* did have questionable aspects to them, their absence from America resulted in more harm than benefit. While the removal of these books prevented new children from being "corrupted" by the inflammatory ideas and images, those who had read and fallen in love with stories like *Sambo* did not understand why they could no longer read their beloved books. Educational reforms as well were slow to equal the far-reaching social changes. One might say that in fact one form of ignorance simply replaced another.

³⁹ www.pancakeparlour.com/Highlights/Thefuture/Short_Stories/Bannerman/bannerman.html

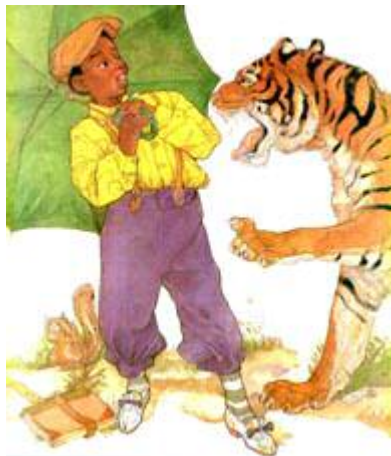
In this time of blacklisting, *Little Black Sambo* fell victim to the sudden surge of apologetic political correctness that flooded the nation. Censored due to its highly inflammatory illustrations and language, the book became a mere memory of those who had enjoyed its innocent adventure story. Since 1976, few libraries even carry the book. In fact, the only place where multiple copies of *Little Black Sambo* can be found is rare book dealers. To this day, only a small number of children, if any, experience the story that until the 1970's was considered by many a classic. Conscious of appearing racist, many white Americans refuse to acknowledge the tale they read so often as children.

However, in 1996, two prominent members of the African-American children's book writing community took it upon themselves to modernize the tale of *Little Black Sambo*. In *Sam and the Tigers*, Julian Lester and Jerry Pinkney retell Bannerman's original story yet eliminate the harmful racial slurs that plagued the first book. The story of *Sam and the Tigers* stresses the all-important themes of unity and tolerance while at the same time maintaining the adventurous spirit of Helen Bannerman's first creation.

From the first line of the story, the reader can easily discern that though the plot of the two books remains similar, the manner of storytelling differs drastically. In opening the tale with the line "Once upon a time there was a place called Sam-sam-sa-mara, where the animals and the people lived and worked together like they didn't know they weren't supposed to"⁴⁰, Lester immediately gives the reader the idea that unity is more important than the concept of racial superiority. Everyone in the town of Sam-sam-sa-mara has the same name, again suggesting that everyone is equal regardless of race. Therefore, while the illustrator Jerry Pinkney chooses to depict Sam (as Sambo has

⁴⁰ Lester, Julian *Sam and the Tigers*. 1996

become in the modern version) as a black hero via the artwork, Lester never mentions his race in the text. As one can witness in the following illustration, Sam is realistic and confident. He carries himself with self-assuredness, not with the same silly, unaware aura as Sambo. His blackness does not define his character; rather he is a child and a human before a member of a race. Yet his color contributes to his character, a contribution he wears proudly and does not shirk from.



With the issue of race taking a back seat in *Sam and the Tigers*, the reader can concentrate on enjoying the whimsical story rather than the disturbing racial depiction of the original tale. As well, the illustrations, unlike Bannerman's crude, primal etchings, portray Sam in a grander light. The colors of his clothes take on a greater importance, as the text gives each a symbolic value. Instead of his parents simply bestowing Sambo with such a wide array of colors, Sam actively chooses his clothes as he searches for clothes that represent himself. Lester portrays Sam as a thinking, confident adolescent instead of the base, unaware, animal-like Sambo. In the modern version of *Little Black Sambo*, the character serves two purposes. While children of all races can identify with Sam's spirit and independence, he as well provides a particular hero to young, black

children yearning to find role models of their own. In fact, Lester states in his endnote “For almost a century, children have enjoyed it. Jerry Pinkney and [Lester] read the story as children and recognized that Sambo was a black hero, but his name and how he was depicted took away his heroic status.”⁴¹

Lester and Pinkney’s new interpretation of *Little Black Sambo* presents such a liberating omen for the future of children’s literature because of its subtle manner when dealing with pressing issues. Instead of trying to influence children into having a more tolerant view of the world, Pinkney and Lester manifest the workings of a unified society and display its benefits. In watching the interactions between the animals and the humans, children immediately become exposed to the benefits of tolerance. By witnessing that in Sam-sam-sa-mara, the humans and animals “lived and worked together like they didn’t know they weren’t supposed to,”⁴² children subconsciously learn how many races can live amongst each other without hatred or prejudice. However, the concept of race never fully enters into the story and does not play a significant element. Therefore, had the artist not chosen to draw Sam as an African hero, each child could picture Sam just as they wanted to. Instead of focusing upon race, Sam becomes a truly universal character any child can relate to.

In her article “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” Nancy Larrick stated that one of the major problems with multicultural children’s literature was that all too frequently, a book would be considered “multicultural” if one black face showed up among a crowd. Larrick stated these books offer no benefit to children of diverse

⁴¹ Lester, Julian. *Sam and the Tigers*. 1996, pg. 40

⁴² Lester, Julian; *Sam and the Tigers*. 1996, pg. 8

backgrounds because the book offers no lessons. When Larrick called for books, which fully examined the relations between the races as well as each race in their own, unique setting, she did not realize that her demands would in fact create a polarization between “white books” and “black books”. Such a dichotomy promoted such philosophies as “separate but equal” instead of the eventual melting pot society which Larrick desired.

While *Sam and the Tigers* removes the concept of race from the story of *Little Black Sambo*, the story counters Larrick’s argument that books that represent ethnicity only in illustrations are invalid. Lester, in his retelling of the story, utilizes a distinct “southern black storytelling voice [Lester] employed in the retelling of the Uncle Remus stories”. Therefore, not only does the book contain a distinct multicultural element in the illustrations, but as well the narrative voice contains a certain ethnic component that gives non-African children a delicate glance into African-American culture. Reading through *Sam and the Tigers*, one easily feels transported into the Deep South in the reconstruction period due to the vocabulary and sentence configuration. Because of the tone Lester chose to write in, *Sam and the Tigers* defies Nancy Larrick’s conventions on multicultural children’s literature.

While technically the book is well put together and modernizes *Little Black Sambo* without losing the original spirit of the story, one final question remains, what affect would *Sam and the Tigers* have upon a constantly conscious American society who condemned *Little Black Sambo* for its racial improprieties. Lester claims in the concluding lines of his author’s note “The biggest challenge for both of us was history. Many whites had loved *Little Black Sambo* as children and were afraid their love made them racists . . . many blacks, angered and shamed, resolved that it be thrown in the

garbage... Yet what other story had I read at age 7 and remembered for 50 years? There was an abiding truth to the story, despite itself. ”⁴³ In fact, many adults, ages 45 through 55 guiltily admit that one book they miss from their childhood was the tale of *Little Black Sambo*. Though skeptical at first about the modern version, the critics were quick to recognize the merit conveyed in Lester and Pinkney’s skillfully rewoven version. The Children’s Book Council awarded *Sam and the Tigers* with the title “notable children’s trade book in the field of social studies”. *Booklist* stated, “ If you read Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* as a child, you remember the wonderful story, especially the part about the tigers that turn into butter; but because of the exaggerated black stereotypes, few children see any version today. Now, nearly 100 years after the story was first published in 1899, Lester and Pinkney have stripped away the ugly racism and retold the story in a new way . . . the whole natural world seems part of the human drama. Adults will be arguing about this book for months . . . As for kids, they’ll love the book about a child hero who can outwit tigers.”⁴⁴ These critical reviews hold such importance to the story because they demonstrate the growth in American society not only away from racism, but as well towards a desire for unity and emphasis upon working together rather than studying human differences. As well, *Booklist’s* statement that “kids will love the book about a child hero...” demonstrates the way in which *Sam and the Tigers* is not about race, but about children.

Perhaps even more telling were the sales figures. The book as of March 2003 still sells consistently on Amazon as well as throughout bookstores. America has spoken and

⁴³ Lester, Julian; *Sam and the Tigers* .1996, pg 40

⁴⁴ Rochman, Hazel *Booklist*, June 1996

finally is beginning to understand the important need for multiculturalism in children's literature.

In his author's note, Julian Lester claims: "It would be unfair to say Bannerman had a racist intent in creating *Little Black Sambo*. However it was published during the era of social Darwinism...History had 'proven' whites were the most 'fit' and people of black African descent the least. Intentionally or not, *Little Black Sambo* reinforced the idea of white superiority through the illustrations exaggerating African physiognomy and a name, Sambo, which had been used negatively for blacks since the early 17th century. Yet the story transcended stereotypes."⁴⁵ In placing the emphasis on the story, rather than on the racial element, Pinkney and Lester find themselves part of a new movement in childhood literature dominant through the nineteen nineties and still prominent into the early 21st century. This movement, evident in such books as *Sam and the Tigers* and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* among others, seeks to create equality and awareness by emphasizing humanity rather than race. Children growing up today are often introduced, through their literature, to a host of other cultures and traditions before they even develop a firm view of the world. As well as African-American books, artists and illustrators from every ethnicity have begun to make names for themselves not only with professional critics, but with the most important judges; children themselves. Through Pinkney and Lester's masterful reworking of *Little Black Sambo*, one can see that it is not politics that carry a book, but rather a good, old-fashioned strong story. As well, the presentation of multiculturalism within the text gives the reader a profound sense of hope for the future. Sam and family are not presented as a separate cultural entity. They are

⁴⁵ Lester, Julian; *Little Black Sambo*. 1996, pg 40

not shown as uniquely African, but instead their color is a compliment to their character. As well, the characters within the book are not aware of their cultural differences. This differs drastically from *The Tale of Little Black Sambo*, where everything about Sambo was defined by his color. Through this example, one can witness that American children's literature is beginning to change for the better. Rather than merely teaching the importance of cultural differences, books now present culture as a sidebar, choosing rather to teach unity, as well as living and working together "Like they didn't know they weren't supposed to." ⁴⁶

Chapter Four:

Where do we go from here?

Children's literature has come a long way from the days of *Pinocchio*. Though still largely a didactic instrument, the literature children read today is largely meant for

⁴⁶Lester, Julian. *Sam and the Tigers*. New York, NY, Puffin Books. 1996, pg 7

entertainment. The *Harry Potter* series for example, which has been on the New York Times Children's Bestseller list since the list's inception (in fact, the presence of *Harry Potter* on the adult bestseller list sparked the creation of the counterpart for children's books), firstly seeks to entertain children rather than to educate. However, through the adventures of the main characters, lessons about friendship, acceptance, and self-confidence among other important life instructions are learned. Yet through the books read by many children in school, the ever-growing awareness of our multicultural society becomes more and more prevalent. School has become for American children the place where views of society are formed and shaped. Through an examination of curriculum standards from thirty years ago in comparison with modern educational practices, one can witness the fundamental change in how America utilizes the didactic nature of children's literature. However, much improvement is still necessary if America truly desires to achieve its goal of being a "melting pot society". Though the type of books published now which deal with cultural elements do so in a much more subtle manner than books such as *RollofThunder*, *HearMyCry*, and *TheHouseofDiestDrear*, the subtle message has much greater influence at an earlier age. For example, the popular young adult book *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros presents life in a Latino-American family without presenting upfront racial issues. In order to achieve full cultural acceptance, a combination of stories with soft undertones of unity at an early age and a base of harsher reality texts at an older age is the only way to properly use youth literature to make America a better society.

In reality, minority cultures in America have made amazing strides towards becoming a literary powerhouse. Not only has the number of African-American artists

and illustrators increased over three hundred percents since Larrick's original study,⁴⁷ but as well the quantity of Hispanic, Asian, and even Native American literature has shown significant amplifications. Such a visible improvement in these numbers comes not only from continued acceptance and better education within American society, but as well from a number of awards and grants available to writers and illustrators of color to gain the recognition and notoriety necessary to survive in today's highly competitive literary market. For example, awards such as the Coretta Scott King Award specifically seek to honor new talent and give these nascent writers the resources necessary to break into a world heavily slanted against them. Aside from the Coretta Scott King Award for African Americans, there exists the Pura Belpré award, named after the first Latin librarian at the New York Public Library for Latino Americans as well as the Americas Award. Native Americans bestow their own awards to fiction, often under the guise of "achievements in social studies." In addition, minority authors such as Allen Say, Gary Soto, Walter Dean Myers, and Leo and Diane Dillon have won the Newbery or Caldecott Medal. The era of political correctness drew attention to these often neglected artists. Yet while political correctness in literature often hides real problems, it served to give notice to authors and illustrators long prejudiced against because of their color. Today, the world is moving towards a situation where one will not receive an award as a result of their ethnicity but rather because of the quality of their work. Yet it was political correctness that brought American society to this point. However, due to these awards and the recognition they give to authors and illustrators, minority artists are finding doors opened to them that previously remained shut on the color line.

⁴⁷University of Southern Mississippi studies in children's literature

Since politics have been an essential quality of children's literature since the inception of the concept of literature for young people, what is it about multiculturalism that makes it such a vital and controversial element of the books we give to children? In America, it is easy to become isolated because of the country's remote location. Therefore the only exposure many Americans receive of the world apart from their own community is through literature. Therefore, literature first and foremost serves as an opportunity to become witness to other cultures. In the ever-shrinking modern world, education about other cultures occupies a great importance. In most peoples' lifetimes, they will confront someone from another country or travel outside of America. Children's literature can lay the groundwork for an open mind so vital to success in today's world. As well, even within American society, literature can be a window for children to learn about the experiences of their other compatriots; experiences they themselves will never have. Multiculturalism is so important to children's literature because it can influence children before the prejudices of the world can have an effect on them. Charlemae Rollins, educator at University of Southern Mississippi in the 1930's and 1940's states:

"Children, as they are growing up need special interpretation of the lives of other peoples, and must be helped to an understanding and tolerance. They cannot develop these qualities through contacts with others, if those closest to them are prejudiced and unsympathetic with other races and groups. Tolerance and understanding can be gained through reading the right books." ⁴⁸

Multiculturalism in children's literature is so important because of the power it has to create tolerance in America's struggling society.

⁴⁸<http://www.ncss.org/>

Before children can begin to learn from what they are reading however, they must learn to love to read. ⁴⁹ According to Ms. Toni Trent Parker, founder and president of the website and retail shop “Black Books Galore”, children will never become thoroughly engaged in a book if they do not find characters in it with whom they connect. Ms. Parker states:

“As a little girl...I never experienced the joy of reading children’s books by African-American writers. The books I was exposed to featured children with blond.. .hair and blue eyes with names like Dick, Jane, and Sally...but my two sons and literally thousands of other children of color can choose from a rich assortment of books by African -American writers and illustrators, books that...reflect the totality of the black experience.” ⁵⁰

For this reason, multicultural characters throughout children’s literature are extremely important. Before the Civil Rights Movement, children of color had no role models except for the “mammie” type figures they saw in movies. Older children could read books like *Native Son* or Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, yet for the first part of their life, children were led to believe that they were as invisible in American culture as they felt. However, in modern American culture, though still not high, the number of books featuring minority characters in a positive light has risen from less than 3% in 1965 to about 11% in 2001. Perhaps many black children, feeling ostracized by their lack of representation in popular literature turn to stories that lack humans as main characters. These books tell their stories via animals so that they are human like, but lack any of the problems of diversity. These stories therefore, can focus on simple entertainment value

⁴⁹Parker, Toni Trent www.blackbooksgalore.com

⁵⁰Robinson, Beverley “Black Books Galore! Continue to Build Bridges to African -American Literature” *Black Issues Book Review* May -June 1999

without worrying about mirroring politics. In fact, in a study conducted of twenty students, ages 18 -22, 80% of the participants cited some animal character as their favorite. ⁵¹ Popular characters included Peter Rabbit as well as an y character from the *Winnie The Pooh*® series.

Books read for pleasure remain constant throughout the years. In fact, most of the stories that children read today are the same books that have persevered through generations such as, *Goodnight Moon*, *The Berenstain Bears*®, *Madeline* and the classics by Dr. Seuss. These stories, while possibly conveying some morals, primarily serve to be enjoyed by children and their parents. In essence, the books popular for “pleasure reading” while providing a different outlook on life and helping the young reader to develop a love for reading as well as greater language skills exist merely for amusement purposes.

On the other hand, it is books read by children in school especially in grades four through seven that serve to influence children’s outlook on life. In these years, many students in school begin learning about different cultures in their social studies class, yet often the reading given in these years fail to reinforce these same themes. For example, most students do not recall receiving any sort of multicultural readings until they reached high school, or at the youngest, eighth grade. However, this varies drastically based upon region of the country. One survey participant from Texas states, “In Texas, there was no emphasis on multiculturalism. Though I don’t really remember much of what we read, it all seemed pretty basic to me. I remember many of the stories taking place in Texas and dealing with the superiority of Texas to pretty much everyone else.” ⁵²

⁵¹ Survey conducted by Erica Serock

⁵² Darden, Marie 11/25/02

In the United States Core Curriculum demands for American school children achievements in social studies, it clearly states, “ Cultures are dynamic and ever -changing. The study of culture prepares students to ask and answer questions such as: What are the common characteristics of different cultures? How do belief systems, such as religion or political ideals of the culture, influence the other parts of the culture? How does the culture change to accommodate different ideas and beliefs? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, history, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum.” ⁵³ The United States demands that Americans have exposure to foreign cultures in order to further understand themselves and their peers. Yet, how can these same schools hope to emphasize these standards when the characters and themes in the books read and studied in school all come from one culture themselves? In the progressive northeast, students start the study of foreign culture, as well as language with stories such as *Shiloh* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* . Yet culture is still studied as a separate entity - as something other than ourselves. In American education today, one can see the makings of a movement towards employing the didactic nature of children’s literature towards bettering our society, yet until educators feel the power within themselves to overcome their own racial and cultural prejudices, hatred will continue to develop from generation to generation.

⁵³<http://www.ncss.org/>

Conclusion

Children's literature from its inception has never been fully innocent. From the beginning, adults have written literature for children in order to manipulate and influence the education of the young and turn them into a mirror image of what society wants them to be. Literary scholars give different names to this phenomenon, be it propaganda, satire, or folklore. Because of its didactic nature, children's literature occupies a unique position. It has the power to influence children in a positive way, to enlighten them that bestow a love of learning as well and provide a looking glass to world's faraway no one person could ever experience in a single lifetime. Children's literature allows the opportunity to make the world a better place to live.

In America, the attitude towards children's literature has been marked with timidity and almost fear. In a society that boasts of being a "melting pot", where everyone from any culture is welcome, the stories children read tell a different tale. As immigration increased into the country more and more children were being raised on American propaganda rather than on their own history. However, many immigrant parents wanted their children to be uniquely American by losing their heritage. Yet at the same time, cultural homogeny proved disastrous and caused greater division when each culture attempted to assert its own identity.

Instead of embracing these differences and educating children about how to respond to habits that vary from the standard, American authors and publishers hid behind a whitewashed world of American idealism. This policy further ostracized minority children, causing them not to want to learn or further advance in society. Detrimental to childhood self-esteem, the colorless face of children's literature proceeded

to harm children for generations until a call for political correctness erupted. However, apologetic white Americans sought to compensate for the lack of diversity for so many years by presenting books that merely featured one race or the other, never the both together. As well, many entertaining stories, enjoyed by children for generations, such as *The Tale of Little Black Sambo* fell victim to constant persecution and eventual censorship.

Yet how does one reconcile a call for culture with a call for unity? In *Sam and the Tigers*, Julian Lester and John Pinkney show the world the answer. In presenting race and ethnicity not as the message of the story but as a compliment to the story, Lester and Pinkney show multiple cultures living in harmonious balance “Like they didn’t know they weren’t supposed to”. While works which deal with hard hitting racial issues are necessary for older children to learn the reality of race, books such as *Sam and the Tigers* must be introduced at an early age to engender a love of reading as well as influence children into dissolving parental and societal prejudices and truly being a beacon of hope for the future.

Today, America has just begun to travel the yellow brick road towards a city filled with peace and acceptance. Through continual efforts by the U.S. government to reward authors and illustrators of color as well as teachers who confront multicultural issues in classrooms, the journey will not be smooth, but will be manageable. Faith and hope are our ruby slippers. Yet as seen throughout the ages, children’s literature is a powerful didactic tool capable of great influence and now must be harnessed to teach Americans to live in unity.

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